

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, commander, Multi-National Division-North and 1st Armored Division, Dec. 8, 2008.

(Note: General Hertling appears via teleconference.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, I do have the top of the hour, so let me just see if General Hertling can hear me.

General, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon.

GEN. HERTLING: Hi, Bryan. I can -- I can hear you. I've been listening to your conversation for the last couple minutes.

MR. WHITMAN: So you can -- you're hearing the Pentagon press corps just kind of waking up this morning.

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, we were commenting on the fact that it's Christmas, it's been a long weekend, and the Redskins played a night game last night. So there probably was a bunch of people wandering in, nursing a hangover and the loser syndrome this morning.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, you're kind of right about that, General. But let me just --

Q (Off mike.)

MR. WHITMAN: Even the Army lost yesterday, too, yes.

Q (Off mike.) Great uniforms, though.

MR. WHITMAN: And the uniforms were stylish, yes.

But let's go ahead and get started. For those of you who might not know our briefer, this is Major General Mark Hertling, who's the commander of Multinational Division-North, as well as the 1st Armored Division. He's no stranger to this room or this format. This is his seventh time that he has briefed us in this format since he assumed his responsibilities in the area in October of 2007. He last spoke to us in October, I believe.

Today he is speaking from Contingency Operating Base Speicher outside Tikrit.

And as is our normal procedure here, he's going to give you a brief overview and update and then take some of your questions.

So General, thank you again for joining us once again. And I'll turn it over to you.

GEN. HERTLING: Well, thanks, Bryan, and good morning. For all of you there, as Bryan said, this is my seventh appearance with this group. And I'm sure many of you are happy that it will be my last as well, as we TOA tomorrow morning.

A couple of opening comments, if you don't mind. We began our deployment here a year ago, September, taking responsibility for MND-North about the same time the surge was taking effect in Baghdad and the awakening was slowly pushing al Qaeda out of Anbar. I told our units that we were arriving at a critical time and that our actions, one way or another, would make history.

I believe the changes in northern Iraq over the last 15 months have been monumental, partly due to the heroic and courageous actions of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines and civilians, but just as much due to the actions of the Iraqi security forces, Iraqi patriotic leaders and citizens who have decided on what they wanted to do in their future.

When we arrived, our task was to decrease violence, partner with Iraqi security forces as well as local and governmental leaders, and grow a nation economy. We saw our roles as allies with the Iraqi people, working with them to change their communities and stop those who sought to destroy them.

When we arrived, there were nearly 1,800 attacks per month. Last week we had our lowest number of attacks in the north, with 108. When we arrived, there were four Iraqi army divisions in the north struggling to conduct operations above the company level, and there were about 55,000 Iraqi police. Nearly 75 percent of those were untrained. Today there are five Iraqi army divisions. They are conducting offensive operations at the brigade level, usually partnering with us. And they are beginning to build confident enablers, like engineers, explosive ordnance teams, intelligence and aviation. And there are 76,000 Iraqi policemen, and 70 percent of them are trained. And there's about a hundred women as well.

When we arrived, there were distrust of the central government, and the unemployment rate was staggering. For every two steps forward, we assessed, they were making one step back. Now there is improved coordination and communication between the government of Iraq and the provinces. And they are slowly executing provincial budgets, they are rebuilding infrastructure with their own dinars, and they are taking three to four steps forward for every one step back.

These actions were brought about not only by the desire of the Iraqi people but, frankly, by the performance of the U.S. military and a very small band of committed and selfless volunteers from the Department of State. The soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Provincial Reconstruction Teams that I have had the honor of serving with have been phenomenal. And I have been amazed as I -- as I've watched them make miracle happen.

We have had 104 of our comrades pay the ultimate price while we've been here, and 891 of our own have been wounded, some very seriously. Many more of our Iraqi brothers have experienced the same at the hands of an evil and committed enemy. At every memorial we rededicate ourselves to our motto, "Make these sacrifices matter." We try to do that, but our prayers are with the family members of our fallen as we complete this tour.

There are still enemies that need to be destroyed. The Iraqi government is still very fragile. And there is a need to polish the representative process and methods of infrastructure repair.

But despite the statistics and the assessments, the most dramatic change is one that only we get to see over here, and that's now a new hope in the eyes of the Iraqi people.

Tomorrow I'm passing the responsibility for MND-North to my friend and West Point classmate Bob Caslen. He and his team have been with us for several weeks, and they are prepared to further the gains that benefit the Iraqi people.

And with that, I'll take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: All right. Who wants to start us off?

Go ahead, Al.

Q Hi, General. It's Al Pessin from Voice of America. You've been there during a very key period when things went from spiraling downward to a much better situation. What would you say was the key, or the few keys, the most important factors in the turnaround in your area?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I think a couple things, Al. I think, first of all, as I said in the opening comments, it's been the military that's been here as well as the work of the members of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

That's certainly been a factor.

I think in some parts of the north -- and you know how big the northern area is; it's about the size of the combined states of Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland and Vermont -- I think the -- in some of those areas, the rising up of the Sahwa, the awakening movements, in areas where they could rise up, was extremely helpful.

I think the Iraqi people themselves have really, as I've mentioned several times in these formats -- they're just sick of violence and they want to push the violence away from their society and get started again after 30 to 40 years of trauma at the hands of dictators.

But I think probably one of the more important facets of the improvements has also got to be placed right in the hands of the Iraqi security forces; the improvement in the army and the Iraqi police that have stood up over the last couple of years. That's always been the strategy, to get them to stand up to take responsibility for their own work, but today that's a reality. They're getting better and better every day.

And I think a combination of those factors -- the people wanting it, the U.S. military and our State Department friends assisting, and the standup of the Iraqi security forces have been the three keys to all of this.

Q If I could just follow up, General: We almost always hear the word "fragile" along with declarations of progress in Iraq. How fragile or not fragile is it in your area?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, that's a great question.

What we've seen over this last -- these last 15 months is a coming together of the provincial governments -- the four provincial governments in the north with the government of Iraq. It's fragile because, frankly, they don't have the democratic processes and the bureaucracies that are needed in something like this. I mean, everything they do is starting from scratch.

Rule-of-law procedures -- I mean, you say, "Hey, you arrest criminals on the street; let's put them in jail." Well, the jails are bad. "And let's try them." Well, we don't have enough lawyers or judges. "Let's work the warrant process." Well, that doesn't exist in the rule of law, for example.

The budget execution problem -- I mean, we literally have budget offices in the four provinces that -- whereas we look at our state budgets as being executed with Excel spreadsheets, you walk into a budget office in Nineveh province, as an example, and these guys are there with big ledgers, opening up and literally writing billions of dinars worth of notes and contracts. There isn't the capability right now to hold people accountable for contract execution. Those are just some examples of the kinds of things we're talking about.

And then you throw into that, you've got an enemy that's affecting this, and in the north for the past several years, and it got extremely bad this year, there was a -- even a disaster of the drought, which affect the -- affected the agricultural area of the north.

So it's been interesting to watch everything, potentially, as a negative effect, but the Iraqi people have continued to fight this. They've fought the enemy. They fought the crisis of the drought. They've tried to put bureaucratic processes in place.

There is -- when we got here, and I think this is true throughout Iraq, nothing works right.

The infrastructure system, repair, the economy, all of the things were really in a very bad state. And that's why I would say it's fragile. And that's why you keep hearing many of the military and the civilian leaders say that it is fragile.

When we got here frankly it was fractured. Now it's fragile. Every day, it's starting to grow and evolve. That's a long answer to your question. But I hope it answers it.

Q Hi. Elisabeth Bumiller from The New York Times.

So are you, do you feel like you're prepared for a drawdown, in the next 16 months or sooner, based on the gains you have made?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I think, what you've seen is, in fact, an adjustment of forces all over Iraq. We have done some adjustment of forces.

I won't use the word drawdown. I don't like that word because, I think, what we're seeing is the adjustment and the operational maneuvering of forces to where they are needed. And when we first got here, those forces were maneuvered to fight the enemy.

We're still doing that to a degree. Now we're maneuvering the forces to partner better with the Iraqi security forces, both the army and the police. Now we're maneuvering forces to do things like train more Iraqi policemen that have never been trained before and help engineers, as an example, rebuild roads and bridges that are still not completely repaired.

We're maneuvering civil affairs teams to work on the budgets, as I talked about the other day. So I mean, drawdown of forces is something that I don't get into as a Multinational Division commander. And my replacement won't get into those either.

I mean, we'll be told one way or another what we have in terms of, at our disposal, forces to use. But our key is to continue to build the infrastructure, so that we can give our leaders, both General Austin, General Odierno and even our political leaders, the opportunity to make other decisions and to maneuver to meet other requirements. So that's our responsibility.

Q General, it's Mike Mount with CNN.

While you've spoken a lot about the advancements, you do still have a problem with foreign fighters in the northern region. As you are preparing to leave, do you think the Iraqi troops are effectively handling the problem with foreign fighters in the north?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, yeah. It's good to hear you Mike. I can't see you, but it's good to hear your voice, since you -- you're not over here now.

In terms of the foreign fighters, what we have seen over the last six to eight months is a slow decrease in the numbers that are coming across the border. That's due to a couple of reasons. We have killed or captured a great deal of them. We have found the way they maneuver. There are still some coming across, but it's significantly less than it was at one point. And I think you know that.

In terms of the Iraqi security forces being able to deal with them, because we are partnering with them right now -- we're partnering with the border forces at the northern part of Rabiya and the border forces along the Syrian border in the western Nineveh Plains. We continue to train them on how to adjust their intelligence to counter that flow of foreign fighters. And in fact, there is soon to be some construction of ditches and fence lines along that northern border.

But more importantly, I think, what we're doing is -- since the institution of the Nineveh operations command in Mosul, we continue to improve our intelligence sharing with General Hassan (sp), who is now the Nineveh operations command commander, where we literally are almost sharing 100 percent of our intelligence, not only on the targets that we received but also the things that they're doing.

And it has been an interesting partnership, because their strength obviously is the human intelligence that they get from sources. Ours strength is obviously more geared toward the technological intelligence, different means of garnering intelligence. So the sharing of that has been the goal in Nineveh and in other places. So I think as we continue to partner, which the SOFA requires now -- and it's something we've been doing already for about the last eight to nine months. As we -- as we're forced to do that under the agreements of the SOFA, it will only get better every day.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, sir.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. When you say nothing is working right and when you say the situation is fragile, how long do you think the situation needs to be resolved? How long -- what the Iraqi government needs to do to help to fix this situation? And I don't know if you could give us, like, in terms of time, how long do you need to start drawing down in your area?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, again, I'm not going to address the drawing down issue. I'll let my senior commanders address that. But in terms of some of the things that the Iraqi government has to do, they're already doing them.

They are increasing -- as an example, they're increasing the visits of Deputy Prime Minister Rafi al-Issawi to all of the provinces. Within the last month, he has been to three of our four provinces. He's been to Diyala, to Nineveh and last week he was in Salahaddin, where he was making a connection with the government of Iraq to the provincial governments, and seeing what they needed, in terms of infrastructure repair. He's been tasked by the prime minister with synchronizing the various ministries to go

after the things that the central government needs to do to support the provinces. That's number one.

I think the big thing that will occur is the provincial elections, which are now scheduled for, as you know, the late January, the January 31st time frame. That, in and of itself, will be huge in order to get elected officials into power that are answering directly to the people.

Right now, all of the governors of Iraq, to include our four governors in the northern provinces, had not been elected. They had been appointed. The governors are increasing the amount of time they're spending with their people.

But I think the provincial elections, what we will see in terms of more of a representative government, the election of a true elected official as the governor and the deputy governor and the provincial counsels, that will be critical in terms of representing all the people within each one of the provinces.

So those are really two examples of things that could happen. I think a third one is, what we have seen over the last three years is a -- fits and starts in terms of execution of provincial budgets. Within the last several months, there has been great gains by the fielding of some technological equipment to the various provinces, which will allow them to increase their capability of executing their budgets to better serve their people.

And I think the last thing that has occurred within the last several months is a naming, within each one of our four provinces, of a Provincial Investment Commission. Those individuals literally are going out to other countries to seek investments to come into Iraq, now that the security conditions are more stable, to start rebuilding the infrastructure and helping the economy.

So those are sort of the things that will continue on a day-by-day basis, as I said before, to help them take three and four, maybe five, steps forward every day for every one step back, which is significantly different than when we first got here.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. You talk about the maneuvering -- that you'll be maneuvering your forces into other roles. But how long, at this point, do you envision a need for U.S. forces to be there, particularly in light of the fact that the SOFA calls for a withdrawal of all U.S. forces by the end of 2011? Will there be a need for U.S. forces beyond that?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I -- you're asking me to speculate on that, and I won't. It will depend on the advances that are made. And those are the options that we're giving our decision-makers in terms of the increased security conditions and the increased stability of the government. I could make a guess right now and tell you something that could drastically change because of differences in the elections next

month. I mean, there may be huge steps forwards after the elections take place, and I really can't look into a crystal ball and say, hey, by June of next year, we're going to have the ability to cut X amount of forces. I just can't do that.

And our leaders will watch on a daily basis the progress that is -- the progress that is made in each one of the provinces, and work with their Iraqi counterparts to determine that.

One of the things I've done within the last several weeks is talk to each one of our four governors in the four Arab provinces in the north and say, "Hey, when do you think you would be ready for provincial Iraqi control?" And they've given me some interesting answers. Some have been later than I anticipated them saying; some have been much sooner than I anticipated saying.

So when they take that provincial Iraqi control, much like Anbar did or much like Wasit province did, it becomes more of their responsibility. And I think they will understand that they've got to -- to garner some new working relationships with their people. So to say how much more -- or how much longer do we need to do there, it would just be a guess if I give you a date. So I really don't know.

What I will tell you, in terms of the SOFA agreement, though -- you kind of alluded to the fact that we will have to leave at X date. I mean, that's -- it's going to be an interesting dynamic over the next several months, as we see the application. My successor, General Caslen, will see the application of the SOFA agreement.

And there -- I don't think there'll be much of a difference here in the north, because we're already partnering with our Iraqi division counterparts for about 90 percent of our operations. And every day we're doing more and more to assist them and their enablers in conducting operations. So they've already come a very long way in terms of what they're doing. Some more -- some more partnership is needed, but they've come a very long way.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service. This is a little bit of a follow-on to what you just talked about. I'm curious, from the standpoint of the boots on the ground, what do you see the implementation of the SOFA -- how is that changing and affecting the troops and how they operate, in addition to the partnering?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, the partnering is the biggest piece. And again, like I said, that's the part that we have been working very closely with our Iraqi -- our five divisions here in the north, we've been working very closely with them. Some of the other things that will change slightly will be the detainee transfer, the ability to interrogate and talk to detainees about gathering more intelligence from them. That will change slightly.



The -- the ability, as you've seen in some of the press reports, of staying inside, or going -- either staying or going inside of major cities, I think we've already, for the most part, executed the majority of that here in the north, where we've already moved to the outside of the cities, other than in places like Mosul where we have combat outposts throughout the city because there is still a significant fight against al Qaeda in that city.

So the movement to the outside of the city, the movement of forces around have to be coordinated with the Iraqi governments, and within the provincial Iraqi governments, we're already doing that.

Some of the rules of engagement will be slightly adjusted. And General Odierno and General Austin are both working on the legal ramifications of that and what we can and can't do. There will never be the opportunity to take away the inherent right of self-defense from soldiers, but there will be adjustments in some other things that we can do.

We started a few months ago some programs in terms of sharing the road with the Iraqis, and doing things in terms of escalation of force and making sure our soldiers knew more and more that the dignity and respect of the normal Iraqi citizen that was really trying to get back to normal within their societies was implemented. So I think we've come a great way in that.

Those are some of the things that will play a part in the SOFA agreement. And by the way, the SOFA in and of itself -- what a great day for the Iraqi government, to sign that document, to declare their sovereignty, and for us to know that we are truly here serving the Iraqi government in the defense of their freedoms. And I think all of our soldiers and our military forces know that.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, this is Kevin Mooney with CNS News. To the extent that you had combat casualties last month, you've had several individuals posing as Iraqi soldiers or posing as Iraqi security forces. Is that something that you've experienced in your area of combat? Is there any concern that Iraqi forces have been infiltrated or compromised in some way?

GEN. HERTLING: Boy, I knew someone was going to ask that question, and I'm glad you did, because it gives me an opportunity to discuss it.

We have had, in fact, over the last 15 months, three different incidents in the north. One occurred last December, where two young soldiers were killed, a captain and a sergeant, by an Iraqi infiltrator. He was an al Qaeda infiltrator into the Iraqi army. He was wearing a uniform, was not part of the military forces.

That individual goes on -- is on trial right now. And in fact there's been some movements in Baghdad in that particular trial -- Soldier Jundi (ph) or Jundi Kaisr (ph) is his name. And I'm sorry; I said he was not an Iraqi soldier. He was an Iraqi soldier.

The second individual was in fact an impostor, had come in -- and that occurred about, oh, six weeks or so ago -- also shot two individuals. And it was just a devastating moment, because it was from the same organization.

And it was just a devastating moment, because it was from the same organization. And that individual was killed in the attempt at -- he killed two of our soldiers, wounded six others. And while he was spraying the field in this little courtyard with bullets, he was killed by a couple of our soldiers.

The third one occurred about two weeks ago. That individual has confessed to the crime. But what was interesting about that particular incident is, the same day that made the news, the partnership with the American -- between the American army and the Iraqi army is so incredibly strong, the division commander called me, called -- the Iraqi division commander called me, called the regimental commander, called the battalion commander, offered his apologies. I happened to be up there that day. The Iraqi division commander literally was crying about the fact that someone within his ranks would have committed this act.

But that same day, we lost another soldier who -- and this is the part -- the kinds of things that don't get reported. And I'd just say this: The exact same day that many things were being reported about how there was infiltration within the Iraqi ranks, there was another soldier who slipped off a river bank in the Tigris River south of Mosul; another soldier jumped in to try and grab him, and drowned saving his life. Sergeant First Class Wilson drowned.

But when that body was lost, there were several Iraqis -- who didn't know Sergeant Wilson -- who entered that freezing water with that rapid current and searched for four hours for that body. This is the other side of the partnering, that sometime isn't recorded.

And what I'll tell you is, it -- am I concerned about these three individuals that shot American soldiers? Absolutely. They were criminal acts. It was murder in all three of the cases. But each one of those -- two of the three individuals are being tried for murder; the other one was killed in the act. And those don't represent the 60,000 Iraqi soldiers that are serving with us daily, conducting operations daily with us in the north; the acts of disturbed or criminal minds that -- are not representative of the Iraqi army, that's for sure.

I'm sorry. That was too long of an answer. But I thought I needed to clarify those three things.

Q General, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes.

You had mentioned, there are still some combat outposts in Mosul. When those are moved by June 20, 2009 outside the city, is there a danger that the city could fall back under al Qaeda or insurgent control?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, Jeff, what I'll tell you, they won't be moved. What will probably happen is, they will be turned over to the control of the Iraqi army. And we will continue to partner with them in those outposts.

So that in and of itself -- they won't disappear. We'll just partner with them more and make better coordination in terms of our actions, which are going on already.

In terms of Mosul falling back under the control of al Qaeda, anywhere in this country has the potential of falling back under the control of al Qaeda. They are -- it's a nefarious, evil group of individuals. And they will continue to attempt to conduct the kinds of attacks that kill innocent civilians, wherever we give them the opportunity.

What I'm really confident of is that the Iraqi security forces are getting after it. And in fact on a daily basis, while I was in command, I was getting reports that I didn't even know things were occurring, where I would get reports, hey, the 2nd Iraqi Army Division did this, this and this; they captured three individuals.

In fact, yesterday, the division commander told me he captured a key vehicle-borne explosive master in Mosul itself. I didn't even know they were in an operation in that area. So while we try and coordinate our operations, they are now doing things on their own and then telling us about it afterward.

So I'm confident that what we have allowed them to do is take on the security of their country. And what I'm seeing in the Iraqi army is some true patriotic leaders.

They are in fact leading the way in terms of bringing this society into a representative government and a representative society. And they are fighting in very nationalistic terms for the future of Iraq. And it's heartwarming to see that.

Q How much of Mosul do coalition and Iraqi security forces control?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I would like to say we control all of Mosul. We have cleared the entire city several times. We are in the hold-and-build stage of Mosul. And I think what's critical to know about Mosul and that I've told my senior leaders is, the Iraqi army is doing a great job.

What we have to continue to build is the Iraqi police.

They're about 7(,000) or 8,000 trained policemen short in the city.

But we're attempting to help them with a training academy. Just Sunday -- or Saturday they graduated their first class of a thousand new policemen on the street. So there are a thousand new policemen up there. And every month after this, they'll graduate about another thousand. So, over time, the police will take control of the city, like good police should do.

But most importantly, what's interesting in Mosul is the ability of the provincial government to build and renew the city. That's what's sometimes lacking in the eyes of the people of Mosul. They don't see a capable government within that city restructuring.

We're trying to help that along, working very closely with the mayor, working closely with the provincial governors, to get that increase of Iraqi CERP dollars and funding through their -- their budgets to rebuild Mosul.

I think when -- when you walk the streets of Mosul -- and I'd invite any of you to come over and -- well, not walk with me, because I'm leaving tomorrow, but walking with General Caslen -- what you will hear is the people not talking about security anymore. What they are now talking about is government and the economy.

And as soon as those two things are taken care of -- and I think they will be with the provincial elections -- we'll see a much stronger Mosul, and it will be the final destruction of al Qaeda in that particular city.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we have reached the end of our time. But before I bring it to a close, let me throw it back to you for any final thoughts that you might have.

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I -- I said a lot of my thoughts in the opening comments, Bryan, and I appreciate you giving me the -- this opportunity.

I want to say, first of all, I want to thank the Pentagon press corps for putting up with me over these 15 months. We've been trying to get the story out. We've been attempting to be very honest with all of you in terms of giving you what you need to inform the American people. And I appreciate the partnership we've had in that.

But I guess most importantly, you know, 15 months for an organization is a very long time. It's not equal to 12 months plus three. It's a long time. We've become very close with the Iraqi people over here. We've seen, like I said earlier, the hope in their eyes. So, we're going to be praying for them and keeping them in our thoughts as we go - - as the 1st Armored Division goes back to Germany and resumes our post there to prepare for future missions.

But the things I want to say is for all the modular brigades that joined us from all over -- and we had a total of 13 brigades from the United States Army join us from everywhere except Germany -- I want to thank them. But most of all, I want to thank their families, because it is a long time. It's tough missing two birthdays or two

anniversaries or a lot of tee-ball games or that first dance recital. And -- and I know that the family members have supported us with everything they've got, because we see it. And we appreciate that more than you can imagine.

We also appreciate the support of the American people in this venture. No matter how you feel about the war, the people have supported the soldiers and that's very important.

So, thank you very much for all of that. And thank you for allowing me to come into the Pentagon at least seven times during this last 15 months.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, on behalf of everybody here, we would like to thank you for giving us so much time throughout the 15 months. You have set the bar very high, so I hope that you are challenging General Caslen to do at least as well as you have done and perhaps even surpass your record.

But again, we want to thank you for not only the time that you've given, but also for your subordinate commanders, and wish your headquarters a safe and speedy redeployment.

Thank you.

GEN. HERTLING: Thank you very much, Bryan. Appreciate it.

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